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DE RUEHROV #0038/01 0721744
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 131744Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY VATICAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1070
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0051
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0043
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 1106

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000038

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 3/13/2029

TAGS: PREL PHUM KIRF KECF AID XA AO CM VT

SUBJECT: HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR POPE'S FIRST AFRICA TRIP

REF: A. VATICAN 28

1B. LUANDA 61

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CLASSIFIED BY: Rafael Foley, A/DCM.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (SBU) Summary: The Vatican hopes that the Pope's March 17-23 visit to Cameroon and Angola will solidify the foundations of the Church in a continent where Catholicism is growing rapidly. The trip also comes as an opportunity for the Pope to change the subject, following weeks of controversies and bad press that have taken a toll on the Vatican's image and morale within the Curia (ref. A). The continent's considerable political, economic and social problems offer the Pope an opportunity to focus on the poor and promotion of peace. In Cameroon, a bridge country between Anglophone and Francophone Africa, the Pope will lay the groundwork for the Synod (meeting) of African Bishops in Rome in October. In Angola, he will underscore the long history of Christianity on the continent and pay tribute to the work of missionaries. End Summary.

12. (SBU) A/DCM and poloff met on March 11 with Archbishop Luigi Travaglino and Monsignor Joseph Bettencourt, both of whom cover West Africa at the Vatican's foreign ministry, to discuss the Pope's trip to Africa. Bettencourt said that, while saddened and worried by the many problems in Africa, the Vatican is excited about the Church in that continent, which is growing "by leaps and bounds." (Note: Africa has approximately 160 million Catholics today, up almost a thousand percent from just 1.9 million a hundred years ago. End note.)

13. (SBU) In addition to the specific goals in Angola and Cameroon (outlined below), the Church wishes to use this visit to highlight how Catholic parishes and relief organizations care for AIDS victims, feed the hungry, and educate children throughout Africa. Bettencourt added that the Church provides these services moved by deep spiritual values. In doing so, it is open to -- and does -- partner with international organizations or governments that do not question Catholic Church values or curtail its freedom of action.

14. (U) An extremely detailed agenda, background information and details about the Pope's visit to Africa is available at the following website:

www.fides.or/eng/documents/dossier_africa_eng _BXVI_2009.doc

Honoring Missionary Work in Angola

15. (C) Bettencourt stated that the Pope's visit to Angola, which coincides with the 500 anniversary of the arrival of missionaries there, reinforces the notion that Christianity is not new to Africa. Furthermore, he said, Saint Augustine was a

bishop in Algeria, and parts of northern Africa became Christian before Europe. Archbishop Travaglino said that while the Government of Angola views the trip as an opportunity to strengthen bilateral relations (ref B), the Vatican views it primarily as an opportunity to pay tribute to missionaries. Asked if relations between the Church and the Angolan government were good, Travaglino said "it depends what you mean by good". Catholic radio stations, he added, are not allowed to broadcast beyond Luanda, and authorities sometimes complain about criticism of the government in Catholic radio broadcasts.

Preparing in Cameroon for a Synod on Africa in the Fall

¶6. (SBU) In Cameroon, the Pope will present representatives of bishops' conferences from around the continent with the "instrumentum laboris," or working document, for the Second Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa. The bishops will expand upon it and then present it to the Pope in October 2009 at their Synod in Rome. The first African Synod was in 1995, and Pope John Paul II endorsed its outcome document in Yaounde. This year's Synod, on the theme of "The Church in Africa at the service of reconciliation, justice and peace" will update and expand the previous outcome document. The Synod in Rome will include lay and religious representatives from around the world and will help, Bettencourt said, to underscore the universality, diversity and unity of the Church. At the same time, he added, the Synod will raise awareness of the physical needs of African communities.

Comment

¶7. (C) The long-planned trip of the Pope to Africa comes at a good moment for the Vatican. Many in the Curia hope that an uncontroversial trip to a continent where the Church plays a substantial role providing humanitarian assistance, health and education will help to elevate the image of Catholicism -- and the Pope as its leader -- worldwide, after weeks of controversy and bad press resulting from the Lefebvrlist controversy (ref).

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B). The trip may, however, raise its own controversies. Paying tribute to the work of missionaries underlines that the Church's role is not just to provide humanitarian services, but to convert people to Christianity, a role that carries its own historical baggage and occasional clashes with non-Christians.

¶8. (C) The Church's growing pains in the continent include local challenges to priestly vows of chastity and obedience, a problem that lead to the famous ex-communication of Archbishop Milingo of Zambia in 2006. Indeed, to avoid such controversies in the future, Bettencourt said the Vatican wants to use the occasion of the Pope's visit to support and strengthen consistent priestly formation on the continent.
NOYES